

## Loose ends



### The seven deadly curs'd sins ... Envy

*Dear Willy,*

I was sad to hear that you did not get the fellowship and even sadder about hearing who did get it. You should not treat this as the end of the world; there will be other fellowships and quality, like truth, will out. Hold on to the confidence in yourself and you should know that this is shared by everybody except the members of the selection committee. It is occasions like this that arouse feelings of envy in those who have failed but, I can assure you, there is no need for this in your case. Envy is the worst of all sins because almost nothing good can be said about it; it involves, by its very nature, malice and ill-will directed at those who have succeeded, and discontent in those who feel slighted and overlooked.

Yet when you come to think about it, it is completely paradoxical. Envy has associated with it the feeling that those who have attained the desirable are undeserving, or at least, less deserving than oneself. In that case, the standards associated with success are clearly deemed to be inadequate, so why should one want to have succeeded anyway? This is a variant of the Marxist (Groucho) paradox, which, you remember, occurs when one declines membership of a club on the grounds that it has stooped so low as to invite people like oneself to join it. In our case, however, we have to ask why anyone should wish to join a club that has refused entry to people like oneself. In fact, there are clubs that have members superior to oneself and, in this case, envy at not belonging is clearly neutral.

I am extremely envious of Darwin, but it is impossible to begrudge him his success and demand that he should have waited a century or so to allow me a fair chance to compete with him. Likewise, I envy Andrew Wiles who proved Fermat's last theorem, but it would be ridiculous for me to ask for additional time to learn enough mathematics to offer him competition. Wanting the desirable but unattainable is very different from failing to get the desirable and potentially attainable.

As you go through life you will find some things that are undesirable and (only too easily) attainable which will come your way. Here is a partial list: acting as a committee chairman, becoming the head of a university department, writing reviews, editing journals, organizing meetings and, worst of all, attending these meetings and finding yourself confronted with a transcript which has to be translated from a Ukrainian dialect into a form of English.

Those who know how to escape from these undesirable activities are worthy objects of envy for they have learnt to conquer other sins, such as senses of duty and service, responsibility to the community, and so on. Envy of such people is almost good; malice is certainly not involved and one wishes only to emulate their success. Sometimes this form of enthusiastic envy can inspire novelty, invention and ingenuity in the great mission of rendering the undesirable totally unattainable. It is sympathy for one who had not succeeded in this mission that led me once to write to a hapless friend along these lines: "Dear Joe, I wish to offer you my sincere condolences on your appointment as Director of the Any Institute. It is at times like this that ones thoughts are drawn to many lamented and departed friends."

You will need to have an armoury of devices to help you to avoid these terrible events. In my time I have deployed many, all unpatented and most kept as closely held trade secrets. In avoiding the undesirable one should not be offensive but rather ensure that the end result is favourable to everybody and especially to oneself. Take the following situation which will happen over and over again in your life. You are invited to give a lecture and you agree to do so on the telephone as part of a pleasant conversation. After accepting, you will receive a long letter telling you about the department, who you are going to meet, etc., and asking for your CV, a short twenty page biography, and a thirty page summary of your main scientific achievements. You are asked to fill out a large number of forms wanted by the University, the State and the Federal Government, all wanting a piece of your \$100 honorarium. There may well also be permits for human experimentation, fetal research and genetic engineering, but I have never got to the bottom of the pile.

Finally, there is a request for a recent photograph. I used to respond by saying no photographs of Dr Brenner exist but people thought I was joking. There were those who proved me wrong by asking for the original of a blurred picture discovered in a country newspaper in Japan. I then modified my approach by sending a slightly pompous letter saying that I had asked my photographic department to deal with this. After a few days a letter was sent enclosing a picture of a pink beribboned white kitten. Within three days another letter was sent apologizing for the frightful error and enclosing a picture of a ferocious looking dog. Usually this made the point and I have never had to use the crocodile, but I dreaded the day when I would meet my match in somebody who, in a brilliant counter-move, would publish one or perhaps both pictures.

I have just looked up envy in the dictionary and found it has two meanings. One has the same derivation as invidious — ill-will. Another comes from the Latin, *invitare*, meaning to challenge, or vie. Perhaps this envy is a virtue. Warmest regards,

*Uncle Syd*